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ABSTRACT

This paper exemplifies and presents the rationale for notional writing materials which are currently being developed for use with advanced level ESL students. The basic assumption of these materials is that effective writing demands a clear sense of why something is being written, and for whom it is being written. The materials are organized according to the language functions that typically occur within academic papers, such as: focusing, substantiating, recommending and predicting. Within each function, students are presented with a variety of voices and audiences. The main advantage of this approach is that it provides the teacher and the students with a framework in which to judge whether or not the writing is effective in terms of a specific purpose, and appropriate in terms of a specific situation. (Author)

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A NOTIONAL APPROACH TO WRITING

by

Sandra Lee McKay

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Every new era in materials development brings its own terminology. Today in the field of ESL, with a shift from a structural approach to a cognitive approach to language learning, a new set of terminology is being developed. Whereas previously we spoke of structured, controlled, or grammatical materials, we now have situational, functional, notional, or communicative materials. There are two dangers to the coining of new terminology. First, the terms may provide nothing more than a new name for an old thing. Thus, although the materials may be labeled "situational", the only difference may be that the pattern practice takes place in a restaurant rather than in a classroom. Second, the use of the new terminology may result in a confused notion of what the basic assumptions are that inform the new materials. In order to avoid these dangers, an explanation of the theoretical basis of notional writing materials is needed.

D. A. Wilkins (1976:18) in his book, Notional Syllabuses, maintains that in designing a notional syllabus, "instead of asking how speakers of the language express themselves or when or where they use language, we ask what it is they communicate through language. We are then able to organize language teaching in terms of content rather than the form of the language." The first question that has to be asked, then, in designing notional writing materials is: what do ESL students need to communicate in writing? As students, they will clearly need to be able to write academic papers; but in the future, they may well need to communicate the concerns of their field to an international audience.

In some ways the assumptions that inform notional writing materials are similar to traditional rhetorical concerns. They differ, however, in two important ways. First, they provide a greater variety of writing voices than is included in most rhetoric books. Secondly, notional writing materials give explicit attention to relating a particular function, such as predicting, to a particular grammatical point, such as the use of modals. Notional writing materials, though, share the following rhetorical concern, expressed by Steinmann (1967:21-22): "Rhetoric, then, is concerned with the effective choice of synonymous expressions; but, as the word 'effective' suggests, it is concerned, not with the utterances only, the mere forms, but with some of <u>their relations to other things</u>." (Italics mine)

It is a clarification of those "other things," that determine effectiveness, which is central to the designing of notional materials. Basically, they involve two primary consideratons: first, the purpose or <u>function</u> of the discourse; and second, the context or <u>situation</u>. Once these two elements are defined, the question of which form is most effective can be answered. For example, suppose an employer decided to write a short memo to an employee, regarding an alternate time for their meeting. His function or purpose would be one of <u>suggesting</u> (although given the role relationship, it might be closer to directing or commanding).

There are, in English, a number of stock phrases for making suggestions, such as: "May I suggest," I would suggest," "How about?", What about?", etc. Given these options, the employer might write:

> Since I have another meeting on Monday at three o'clock, may I suggest that we meet at two o'clock?

Or he might write:

> I'm tied up at three o'clock on Monday. How about two o'clock?

In this instance, the choice of the most "effective" form depends on what the employer wants to say to his employee about their relationship. The first sentence assumes a distanced relationship with his employee; the second, a relationship of comradery. Both, however, fulfill the stated purpose of suggesting a change of meeting time. Whereas most native speakers would immediately see the distinction between the two sentences, many international students have not yet mastered this level of language use. To aid international students in developing this skill, textbooks could present lists of items for expressing a particular function, such as making suggestions. This method, however, does little to aid students in knowing when to choose which form, so that their writing is appropriate in terms of a specific level of formality, and effective in terms of a particular purpose. The basic aim of the writing materials which follow is to help students develop appropriateness and effectiveness in their writing.

These materials were designed for an advanced writing class in which the students had TOEFL Scores of between 450 and 525. The first step in developing the materials was to determine what type of writing the students were doing, and what fields they were in. Questionnaires were distributed to the students which asked

them to list their major fields, and to describe two writing assignments that they had completed in their other classes during the semester. The survey showed that typically the students were either science or business majors, and that, in general, they did very little writing in their other classes except for an occasional term paper.

Although most ESL students need to develop skill in academic writing, very few of them will be writing these kinds of papers once they graduate. Clearly a well designed writing course should meet not only immediate writing needs, but also future needs. One way to accomplish this task is to organize writing materials according to the various uses of language such as informing, predicting, clarifying, etc., since these functions are present in all types of written discourse. Predictions, for example, can occur in academic papers as well as in business reports and in scientific journals.

The main problem in designing writing materials based on functions is to decide which functions to deal with, and how to order these functions. Since one goal of these materials is to develop academic writing skills, one answer to the problem of selection is to determine which functions typically occur in an academic paper, and in what sequence they occur. Within an academic paper, the following list of functions tend to occur in a fairly regular pattern:

I. Inform/Focus	What does the paper intend to do?
II. Clarify	How will the central terms be defined?
III. Classify	What are the major components of the issue?
IV. Analyze	How can the components be organized in terms of time, space and/or effect?
V. Substantiate	What support can be offered for the assertions being made?
VI. Compare/Contrast	Are there any similarities and differences between the major assertions?
VII. Agree/Disagree	What are the writer's reactions to the issues being presented?
VIII. Recommend	What should be done in regard to the issues being discussed?
IX. Predict	What will be the likely results of the recommendations?

This list of functions forms the basis for the organization of the materials. By organizing the materials in this manner, the students have an opportunity to practice writing the central components of an academic paper. The intention, however, is also to meet the students' future writing needs. In order to do this, the situations under each function deal with a great variety of career backgrounds.

Each lesson begins with exercises which introduce the phrases used in expressing a particular function. For recommending, there are exercises using such terms as: I would recommend, May I suggest, It would be best to, etc. The goal of these exercises is to help students become familiar with the forms that are typically used to express a function. The following is an example of an exercise designed to introduce students to phrases of definition:

Practice Using Terms: Define the following terms by completing the sentences:

1. Define a non-resident student as it is used at your university for determining tuition rates.

   A non-resident student is anyone who....

2. Define an upper-division student as it is used at your university.

   An upper-division student is defined as a student who....

3. Define a full-time student as it is used for purpose of issuing visas.

   For purposes of issuing visas, a full-time student is taken to be any student who....

4. Define a grade of incomplete as it is used at your university.

   An incomplete grade signifies that....

5. Define the meaning of a student in good standing as it is used at your university.

   By a student in good standing is meant a student who....

Following this exercise, there is a list of common expressions used in defining which can be used as a reference for the student. These introductory exercises on common expressions are followed by exercises on the grammar and punctuation which is relevant to the particular function of the lesson. If a student will need to use quotations in substantiating an assertion, punctuating quotations is the focus of the punctuating exercise. If a student needs to use modals in making predictions, modals are the focus of the grammar exercise in that lesson. The basic purpose of the introductory exercises is to provide the student with all the forms that are needed to express a particular function in a specific writing context.

The next part of the lesson provides situations which involve a number of writing voices such as a geologist, an advertising agent, a member of a jury, etc. The various writing contexts allow the teacher or student to select the situation which is most relevant to the needs and interests of the students. Some of the situations are highly controlled and provide the student with all of the data, as well as directions for how to organize the data. The situation listed below is included in the initial chapter on Inform/Focus.

SITUATION: The Immigration and Naturalization Officer

You are an officer for the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Recently there has been a great deal of discussion about the problem of the illegal entry of people into the United States. Because of these discussions, the director of the U.S. Office of Immigration and Naturalization has asked you to submit a report in which you recommend various solutions to the problem of illegal aliens.

TASK:

Write the introduction to your report on illegal aliens in the United States. As background information, you may use some or all of the following information.

----In 1967, the Immigration and Naturalization Service apprehended 100,000 illegal aliens.

----In 1977, the Immigration and Naturalization Service apprehended 750,000 illegal aliens.

----The Immigration and Naturalization Service estimates that for every person who is apprehended, four to five other persons avoid capture and deportation.

----A study conducted for the Immigration Service in 1976 indicated that 8.2 million people were in the United States illegally.

(Source: U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service)

Your introduction should have two parts:

Inform: Several general statements about the problem of illegal aliens in the United States.

Focus: A statement of the purpose of this report: to suggest solutions to the problem of illegal aliens.

Other situations are much less structured. For example, the following situation requires the students to gather their own data and to make a limited assertion based on this data.

SITUATION: The Dean's Assistant

You work for the Dean of Academic Affairs. You have been asked to write a report on the cost of textbooks. The Dean believes that, in general, science majors are being asked to pay more for their textbooks than are humanities majors. He wants you to write a report regarding this issue.

TASK:

In order to substantiate the claim that science majors pay more for books than do humanities majors, you need to survey the cost of textbooks. Begin by randomly selecting one upper division course from each of the departments listed on the following chart. Then compute the total cost of the textbooks for each of the courses

that you have selected. Once you have this information, compute the average cost of textbooks for humanities students and science students. Finally, write the Dean a brief report which summarizes the findings of your limited investigations. It is possible that your findings will refute rather than support the Dean's assertion.

SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES

Department	Course	Cost of Textbooks
Classics		
Comparative Literature		
English		
Foreign Languages		
Journalism		
Philosophy		
	Total:	
	Average Cost:	

SCHOOL OF SCIENCE

Department	Course	Cost of Textbooks
Biology		
Chemistry		
Geology		
Mathematics		
Engineering		
Physics and Astronomy		
	Total:	
	Average Cost:	

Each lesson concludes with correction exercises of student papers that were written in response to the situations. The exercises have guidelines which ask the students to correct errors that the students themselves are most likely to make, or have made in writing their response to the situation. The following is an example of a peer correction exercise. It involves a situation in which an insurance agent writes a letter to a prospective customer about the types of life insurance offered by

his company. The students have been provided with the basic information about the types of life insurance.

PEER CORRECTION OF STUDENT COMPOSITIONS
SITUATION: THE INSURANCE AGENT

Penn Mutual Life Insurance
5678 C Street
San Francisco, California 94111

March 13, 1978

Mr. Andrew Smith
1234 B Street
San Francisco, California 94103

Dear Mr. Smith,

In response to your letter, I am glad to let you know that (a) we have three type of life insurance.

(b) The first one is ^term policy. People who purchase a term life insurance policy just have ^a temporary protection [within] a certain period. For example, the father in the family wants ^a temporary protection on his life while his children grow up. If he dies within a specified period, his children will get the money.

(c) The second is ^the whole life insurance. It is the most common type which provides ^an insurance protection [of] ^the entire life. When the policyholder dies, the beneficiary will receive the face value of the insurance. It is a flexible policy that can meet many different needs.

(d) And the last one is the endowment policy. This type provides a certain amount of money in the future, besides ^the life insurance protection. People can get back a sum of money after ^the certain time.

In brief, if you check out these types of life insurance, I think you (have) some idea about life insurance. Please let me know your decision.

Sincerely yours,

Practice in Correcting: Complete the following steps in order to correct the grammatical errors and inappropriate language in the selection by the insurance agent.

1. In order to practice using common phrases for classifying, write in the space below an alternate way of stating the four underlined phrases.

   a.

   b.

   c.

   d.

2. Wherever there is a circled verb , make the correction in subject-verb agreement.

3. Wherever there is an underlined verb , make the correction in verb tense.

4. Wherever there is an enclosed preposition , replace it with the correct preposition.

5. Wherever there is a carat , make the necessary correction in the use of the article.

6. Wherever there is a punctuation mark enclosed in a triangle , make the necessary correction.

7. Replace the verb, check out, in the last paragraph with a more formal verb.

These materials attempt to integrate the concerns of function, situation and grammar. By selecting and ordering the functions on the basis of academic papers, the students are learning to write all of the core functions of an academic paper. By expressing these functions in a variety of situations, the students are being exposed to specialized vocabulary that may be beneficial in their careers. Furthermore, the situations provide a specific context in which to decide whether or not the particular form that the writer has chosen to express a prediction or to make a suggestion is appropriate and effective. Finally, in this approach, grammatical concerns are not isolated, but are clearly related to the expression of a particular function. In this way, notional writing materials integrate the concerns of function (what is being said), situation (to whom is it being said), and grammar (how is it being said). In general, they provide an opportunity to meet students' immediate and future writing needs, and to develop both grammatical and communicative competency in writing.

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